

Zero-Mile Mark by MonsterSquad

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Summary: Considered an outcast even at her new school, Jane "Eleven" Hopper feels like she will never have a friend. Mike Wheeler is fascinated by her even though his friends think she's weird. They find themselves together on a school backpacking trip and learn about life, friendship, and each other.

1. Chapter 1

The cafeteria was bustling with lunchtime excitement. Mike Wheeler kept anxiously looking up, searching the room. Besides one class that he had with her, this was the only time of day he saw her, and that was only for the five minutes it took her to eat the sandwich she always brought from home. Then she would disappear for the rest of the lunch period.

"I wonder where she goes every day." Mike picked at his food. He'd seen her leave just a minute ago.

"Who, the weirdo?" His friend Lucas rolled his eyes at Mike.

"She's not a weirdo. We don't even know her." Mike was annoyed. They all could be considered weirdos. Lucas wasn't being fair. Mike crammed the rest of his lunch back into his lunch bag. "I'll see you guys later. I have to go do something." He didn't wait for a response and had soon left the cafeteria and was heading in the same direction he'd seen her go. *Jane. Her name is Jane.* He recalled the class he had with her, chemistry. She sat in the back and was always very quiet. He'd find himself wanting to turn around and look at her during class, maybe smile at her, but from his seat in the front of the room he knew he would be caught by someone, if not the teacher then another classmate who would undoubtedly make a big deal of it and end up causing both of them embarrassment.

He had seen her turn left as she exited the cafeteria so if she wasn't in the hallway she had to be either in the gym or the library. He took a chance and checked the library first. It was silent as he opened the doors, not a single student milling about the room. It was a large space though so he thought he would do a quick once over to check in the stacks and the study carrels. He had looked almost everywhere, not even seeing the librarian, when he noticed in the far corner a table. He couldn't help but stop where he was when he saw her sitting at the table with her nose in a book. The noontime sunlight was filtered through a skylight and fell around her head and shoulders like an angelic blanket.

Jane Hopper had started her junior year of high school in a new town

and at a new school. She'd had a hard life growing up, having been adopted just a year prior by a policeman who had taken her from the foster home she had been in when there were some issues with the government. But she'd always had issues with the government. Even as a baby. She knew she was different and she could tell her peers thought so as well. She had never had any friends, always the butt of jokes or the "freak" to the other children at school. When she was around 12 years old she just started keeping to herself and not exerting any more effort on trying to make friends when she clearly never fit in with the other kids. She had been escaping to the library at lunchtime every day since the seventh grade so she could avoid the torture of having to sit alone while everyone else seemed to have a social group. She had gotten used to it. It was just the way her life was going to be. She had accepted it. She had her books and she liked photography. There was something about being behind the lens that appealed to her. She liked the quiet serenity of nature. She was engrossed in her book, *The Stranger* by Albert Camus, and didn't see anyone standing in front of the table until she heard a slight cough and looked up.

"Um, hi." He said.

She looked around, making sure he was talking to her. He was.

"Hi."

"Do you mind if I sit down?" He asked.

"I don't mind." She went back to reading.

He sat down at the table, staring at her. She seemed to sense his staring and looked up at him. When she made eye contact he took his chance.

"I'm Mike. Mike Wheeler. We have chemistry together. Chemistry class, I mean."

"Right." She said quietly. She was not used to talking to people. Or, she wasn't used to people talking to *her*.

"So you're Jane?"

She shrugged. "I guess so. I call myself Eleven though."

"Why?" He asked, genuinely interested.

"I have my reasons." She stated flatly, signaling that she was not wanting to take that part of the conversation further.

Mike sighed. He hoped he didn't sound too ridiculous as he finished what he wanted to say to her.

"Um, so anyway, I noticed you always leave the cafeteria and I was wondering why. I followed you today, well, *kind of*. I don't mean to pry but I was just curious."

She put her book down and seemed thoughtful for a minute. Mike noticed that her eyes were the most lovely shade of brown.

"I don't have anyone to sit with and people make fun of me so I just come here every day so I can be alone. It's easier to be alone when people aren't pointing it out to you." She looked rather sad, but then went back to reading.

Mike's heart ached at the sentiment. She was really pretty, now that he was sitting right in front of her and didn't have to steal sideways glances. And she was smart, judging by her reading choices, and her voice, though soft, was like listening to music.

"So what do you like to do for fun?" Mike asked, trying to change the subject to something that might elicit less melancholy answers.

"I like to read." She said.

Great, now I'm just pissing her off. Mike thought.

"And I like to be outside, like in the woods. I like photography."

"I'm in the backpacking club." Mike offered. He tended to ramble when he was feeling nervous. "We have an overnight trip planned for next weekend. I'm kind of looking forward to it. I got a bunch of backpacking stuff for Christmas last year because my dad used to backpack when he was young and he seemed excited that I was interested. He's never excited about my interests." Mike noticed that

she was now staring at him. He continued, "my friends aren't really into it but I thought it would be cool to try something new." He finally stopped himself. He felt like he was wasting her time, annoying her, or just making himself look like a complete idiot.

She looked at her hands, still clutching her book. "I'm in that club. I wanted to take pictures of the scenery. I've never been backpacking before though. My new dad pulled some strings to get me into the club after sign-ups had already passed." She looked hopeful but worried as well.

"Are you scared to camp in the woods?" Mike asked.

"Not really. I'm scared to be with a group of people that don't really want me to be there. I want to experience it for what it is, not try to be invisible the entire time so they don't call me names and make me hate even being there." Her mouth turned into a frown. It wasn't an angry frown, it was like she was trying to control her face so her lip didn't start trembling.

Mike couldn't help himself. He reached across the table and patted her hand. He could feel his ears getting red and his cheeks flushing. "It's going to be okay. I'll be there. I will stick up for you. You can walk with me if you want." He pulled his hand back, not wanting to make her uncomfortable. She seemed like she needed a hug but he didn't think the first ten minutes of their friendship was the time for him to do that.

"Thanks, Mike." She smiled, a crooked little half smile that made him feel butterflies.

He coughed, trying to break himself out of the spell he was sure he was under. "So, should I call you Jane or Eleven?"

"I prefer Eleven but I know it's very weird. I'm weird enough. You can call me Jane so you don't get picked on too."

"How about I call you El? Short for Eleven? I don't think that will draw attention."

She looked pleased. Someone was trying to put her feelings first and

it was a foreign concept to her. Especially for it to be someone her own age. She didn't want to get hopeful that she might actually have a friend but it was hard not to when he was looking at her with those eyes and he seemed so caring and honest.

"I'd like that." The bell rang and she stood up. "Thanks, Mike. It was nice talking to you. I would like to walk with you on our backpacking trip." She smiled at him then, not a half smile but a real smile. It took his breath away. He watched her go and the warning bell had rung by the time he remembered that he still had three classes that day. He got himself in gear and just made it to chemistry. He wasn't late but he was the last one there. He spotted El in the back of the room and their eyes met. He couldn't help but smile at her. She smiled back and he noticed how her cheeks turned pink. It made him feel weird, but in the best way. He took his seat and class started.

The plan for the backpacking trip was that they would leave the school on a Friday afternoon, hike a short distance to some pavilions where they could camp for the night and eat dinner, then the following day they would do the bigger part of the hike and camp one more night. Their food would be waiting for them at the campsites each night so that they didn't have to bring a lot of extra weight. They were to all have snacks and lunches with them but were supposed to keep the rest of their equipment as light as they could. They were going to be hiking the Falls Canyon Trail and Mike was excited. He and El were sharing a seat on the bus, her having the window seat, and he could tell she was eager to see waterfalls and whatever else she might want to photograph. They were bouncing down the road when one of the group leaders stood up to address the students.

"Just so everyone knows, when you go backpacking, for some reason it always rains." He waited for the collective groan from the students to subside before he continued. "Rain gear was on your list of essentials. I just wanted to remind you so that when it happens, and it will, I don't get a lot of people crying that they want to go home."

"I hope it doesn't rain." El was dejected. "I don't have any rain gear. I only have what my dad put in my backpack."

"I have extra stuff. I know they said to pack light but I brought all of

my gear. I have an extra poncho. Or you can wear my raincoat and I'll take the poncho. Either way." Mike's warm smile immediately lifted her spirits.

They finally rolled into the parking lot near the trailhead. Everyone clambered out of the bus and went about finding their gear. Mike shouldered his pack and then helped El find hers amongst the bags sitting on the ground, having been removed from the compartment on the bus.

"It's that one." She pointed at a drab green pack that looked like it had been to Vietnam...twice. Mike picked it up and helped her put it on.

"Look at the freak and her Army bag!" Someone yelled.

"Fuck off, Troy!" Mike seethed.

"Mike, it's okay. Just ignore him." El put her hand on his arm and he immediately felt calm again.

"We're going to have a fun time, El. I promise. This is going to be a good weekend." He smiled. "And think of all of the cool pictures you'll get to take!"

She grinned. *Oh, wow. Her grin!*

"Does your camera have a self-timer?" Mike inquired.

"Sure. I might have a crummy backpack but I have a nice camera. Hop got it for me for our first Christmas together."

"Hop? You call your dad Hop?"

"Well, it's like a nickname for Hopper. Everyone calls him that. Maybe if I'd lived with him since I was little I'd call him dad but it just seems strange since I'm seventeen and I've never really had a dad. Maybe someday I'll call him dad but for now, Hop is fine for both of us."

The explanation seemed to make sense to Mike. They followed their group onto the trail. Their leader was giving a list of instructions

before they set off in groups of two so that they didn't trample each other or clog the trail for other hikers.

Mike and El joined the group, standing in the back of the pack.

"Now, *stay together* at all times. The difficulty of this trail is marked "hard" so there is always the danger of falling or getting hurt in some way. If this happens use your signal whistle to alert someone. If it starts raining stop and get your rain gear on and then continue. We will meet at a group of pavilions tonight where you can all set up your tents and we'll have dinner ready when you get there. The pavilions are on the trail so you will run into them as long as you stay on the trail. And that brings me to the most important rule...*stay on the marked trail*. Extremely important! This forest is expansive and if you'll take a moment to look around, you'll notice that the trees look the same. It would be very easy to become lost quickly and that could end up being disastrous. Follow the white blazes at all times."

Students paired off and started up the trail, leaving space between themselves and the group just ahead of them. Mike and El ended up as the last group to set off. After a little while they couldn't see anyone ahead of them but it was fine since El was busy taking pictures and Mike was busy watching her do it. They had been on the trail for about an hour.

"Why do you call yourself Eleven?" Mike asked as El took a picture of the horizon. The leaves had the mid-October colors that were currently at their brightest. It was breathtaking to look out at all of the foliage.

El sighed. "I like being friends with you, Mike. I don't want you to think I'm weird. I mean, I am weird, but I don't want to be *too* weird and then you don't talk to me anymore."

"That won't happen."

El pondered. She let her camera rest from the neck strap and walked over to Mike. She was wearing a leather bracelet on her left wrist. She looked down at it and then pulled it back. Mike gawked at what he saw. It was a tattoo that said *011*.

"What is that?" Mike asked. He had taken her wrist in his hand to inspect it and even though she felt exposed and scared, his hand on her wrist felt nice so she let him do it.

"Well, it's a tattoo. I've had it since I was a baby."

"Who would tattoo a baby?" Mike asked, incredulous.

El shrugged. "I told you I was strange, Mike. Maybe someday I'll tell you the whole story but for now I'd like to see what it feels like to have a friend for once so I'm going to hold back the stuff that will send you running. For now. If it's okay." Her eyes pleaded with his.

"Sure, El. But please know that I'd like to know the whole story. I won't turn away from you. If you trust someone with sensitive information they should count themselves lucky that they seemed trustworthy enough to be told. I won't let you down."

And she knew he wouldn't. She just wasn't ready for him to really see her for who she was. It was nice being normal and with him she felt like a normal teenager.

"Can I ask why you still call yourself Eleven when you do have a real name?"

"Growing up I was always alone. The tattoo says *011*. 0 means nothing. Eleven is two ones next to each other. It's so I always remember that even if I'm next to someone I'm still alone."

A/N: Let me know what you think! I know what is going to happen, just not sure if anyone else wants to know.

2. Chapter 2

Mike didn't know what to think. That was possibly the saddest sentence he had ever heard uttered from someone his own age. He didn't have tons of friends but he had no idea how it must be to feel totally alone. His heart broke for her. He was quiet for a few minutes, just getting his thoughts together. They had started hiking again.

After a short while, Mike broke the silence. "You're not alone, El. At least, you don't have to be. Not anymore. I kind of hate that you've ever felt that way. I feel like I've known you forever and I don't even know much about you. It's weird. But in a good way? You know? Anyway, I want to know more about you and I definitely want to be your friend."

"You do? But people will pick on you." She said as she stopped to turn around and look at him. She had been walking a couple of paces ahead.

"People pick on me anyway. I don't care what they think. I think you're cool. I want to be friends."

El turned back around to start again but also to hide the huge smile on her face. She was apprehensive, yes, but that he had seen some of her oddity and still was interested in being her friend gave her a fluttery feeling she was definitely not used to and she felt like she needed to hide it for the time being.

They hiked for a little while longer. As they topped a ridge El spotted a waterfall that looked to be about fifty yards away down a drop-off from the trail they were on. Her face couldn't hide her excitement.

"I want to go take pictures of that waterfall! Look at it!" She pointed to where she was looking and Mike could see it. It was a pristine waterfall that looked to be about twenty-five feet high. The rains they'd had the past few weeks had made it swell so that it was rushing over the cliff and looked like something from a movie. El was clearly excited.

"It's not exactly on the trail, El." Mike worried aloud. "It looks like it

wouldn't be too hard to get to though. I'll come with you if you want to get closer to it." He smiled. It was just right there. They could easily climb back up the slope to the trail they were hiking. It would be easy peasy.

They made their way down to the falls, using a switchback method so they wouldn't have to go straight down and risk hurting themselves by falling. They finally made it to the edge of the stream where the falls were emptying. It was really a beautiful sight. It was also loud. They had to shout to hear one another and the look on El's face was one of pure joy. She hopped around from rock to rock trying to get the perfect angle, squealing with delight as she snapped her photos.

They had dropped their packs near a big rock next to the pool the falls were pouring into and while El snapped pictures Mike explored the side of the falls. He could see behind them and noticed that it wasn't one waterfall but two, with a smaller one feeding into the larger one. He yelled at El to get her attention and motioned for her to join him near the side of the cascade.

"Do you want me to take your picture standing in front of it?" Mike asked when she was close enough that he no longer had to yell.

El looked around and saw a flat rock that was about waist high sitting at the perfect angle. She positioned Mike where she wanted him, sitting on a mostly dry rock at the side of the falls where she could see the downrush behind him, fiddled with her camera before setting it on the rock where it was pointed at them, and hurried back to Mike, sitting next to him. He understood what was happening and he pulled her closer to him just as the shutter released on the timer. El knew that she would treasure that picture.

"I think that will be better than a picture of just me." El said shyly as she retrieved her camera. They explored the area for a little while longer. The rocks and paths through them were infinitely intriguing.

"This is like Dagobah!" Mike exclaimed.

"It totally is." El smiled, noticing the surprised look on his face.

"You like *Star Wars*?" Mike couldn't believe it.

"What's not to like? A hero with powers who feels alone and then finds a group of friends and a family? That's the dream." She sounded forlorn.

Mike thought that was a deeper answer than he'd expected.

They had put their packs back on after they took the picture of the two of them and had continued to search the area for other photo opportunities. Mike glanced at his watch and then looked at the sky.

"Um, El? I think we should start trying to get back to the trail. It's going to get dark soon and it will get colder. We need to be able to meet back up with the main group."

"Okay, which way should we go?" El asked.

Good question. Everything looked the same. They had gone around the waterfall on their exploration and now they couldn't remember if they had turned right or left. They tried to get back to where they started but the shadows had changed and nothing looked familiar to them. They crossed another small stream, Mike thinking if they followed the water maybe they would end up back where they needed to be. After wandering for a while, and with the sun setting quickly, the canopy of trees making it darker, Mike dreaded what he was about to have to tell his partner.

"I think we're lost. It will be dark soon so we need to find a place to camp for the night. I can set up the tents and start a fire. I'm sorry, El. I should have tried to mark our trail as we went along." He sounded bewildered.

"It's not your fault, Mike. I'm the one who wanted to go off the trail. I got *you* lost. I'm sorry." She looked around warily. "But where can we camp? I've never done this."

Mike looked around. The area had big rocks, or small cliffs, he wasn't sure which, near a small patch of young growth trees. The ground looked flat so he knew it would be a good place to set a tent. There was a log lying on one side of the space.

"Here seems good. These cliffs or whatever they are will act like a

windbreaker and also protection. And it's flat so we can set up our tents and start a fire. Don't worry. We'll get out of here tomorrow." He smiled, trying to allay her fears somewhat. They took off their packs and leaned them against the log.

"Let's see what we have to work with." Mike said as he started to unpack both bags. He had brought all of his gear so he had more than he would really need for a standard hike like he was supposed to be on, but now that he would have to spend the night in the woods alone he was glad that he had brought everything. He started to remove items from his backpack as El looked on.

"What's that?" She asked as he took a small, round, metal object out of the pack.

"It's a camp stove. I told you I brought everything I had." He smiled as he continued to unpack.

El copied him and started to unpack her own bag. She was about to apologize for her lack of useful items when Mike looked over at what she had unpacked.

"That is awesome!" She didn't know why he was so excited.

"What is?" She looked puzzled.

"You have two tarps, rope, tent stakes, and is that a hatchet?" He seemed really excited as he looked at what she thought of as useless pieces. "Your dad must be smart."

"I guess? Why is this good?" She still hadn't caught on as to why Mike thought this was so great.

"Because with this stuff I can make sure my tent stays dry. They said it was probably going to rain. This way we can use one tarp as groundcover and put the tent on it. I can tie the rope here between these two trees, just over my head, and make a tent for my tent with the other tarp. We can use the tent stakes to hammer down the tarp on top so it doesn't blow away. It will even be big enough under there to stack some branches or other stuff we can use to burn in the fire." Mike's excitement was making El feel more at ease. The sun was

setting by the minute though so he had to get started.

"I'm sorry I don't have a real tent." El said, apology still dripping from her voice.

"It's fine. We'll be warmer if we share anyway. It's October. It will be cold. There's no way around it." Mike was busy working on the tent situation.

"I'm going to get some rocks for a fire pit and try to find some firewood that is dry enough." El stood up from the log where she had been sitting and proceeded to walk a little ways out of their makeshift campsite.

"Are you sure they won't be too heavy?" Mike had already put the tarp on the ground and was in the process of setting up his tent.

"I'll be fine. Don't worry about me, Mike." El crossed over the site and down a short hill, she could hear Mike cursing under his breath at his ongoing fight with his tent poles. She thought it was funny. He couldn't see her though so it was easy for her to lift the rocks she needed and get them close enough to camp so that she could just pull them over one at a time manually. She had to pull a couple from a stream but it took little effort. She walked back up the small hill and picked up a rock that she had placed just out of Mike's eye line from where he was working on the tent.

She tossed the rock onto the ground as Mike was tightening the rope he was hanging over the tent. He noticed her wipe her nose.

"Are you okay? Is your nose bleeding?" She could hear the concern in his voice.

"It does that sometimes. Has for as long as I can remember. I'm fine. Don't worry." She smiled and went to get the rest of her rocks. She had to get them one at a time using her arms but they weren't far away. She placed them in a circle and sat down on the log, waiting for Mike who had put up the second tarp by that point and was hammering the stakes into the ground with a rock. El was impressed at how functional the setup looked. His tent was small but like he'd said, maybe that would help them stay warmer.

"Is there anything else I can help you with?" El asked. Mike was fishing around the top of his pack for some matches. She had gathered what firewood she could find while he was still working on the tent. It was dark now so she was holding a flashlight for him so he could see what he was looking for. She would have to hold it for him while he lit the fire as well.

"I have an air mattress here on the ground somewhere. It's lime green. If you want to blow that up you totally can. It's not huge but it will help some so we're not completely on the ground. You can probably just set the flashlight on your lap pointed at me so your hands can be free."

El found the air mattress easily. Mike had put the wood in the circle shaped pit El had created and after breaking up some smaller pieces to use as kindling started striking matches to get it to light. It took three matches but finally they had a flame and Mike fanned it to cause the oxygen to make it bigger. Mike took the air mattress El had inflated and their two sleeping bags and trudged over to the tent. He put the mattress in, followed by the two bags. He frowned to himself. The air mattress wasn't big enough for them both to sleep on. He sighed and moved it completely underneath El's sleeping bag. He could sleep on the ground. It wasn't a big deal. He knew she already felt bad enough that they were lost, he certainly wasn't going to add to her discomfort.

El was sitting by the fire, mesmerized by the dancing of the flames. The glow of the fire made everything around it sparkle with orange and yellow.

As he emerged from the tent, finally finished with the work that needed to be done for the day, he realized that he was pretty sweaty and didn't want to sleep in a shirt that smelled and was damp with sweat. Walking back to his backpack which was still leaning against the log El was sitting on, he stripped his shirt from his torso. El watched as he did this and could feel her face burning with her blushing but the darkness and the firelight reflected on her face hid it from Mike.

"I hope I don't stink." Mike said as he rifled through his backpack. "I have a couple of extra shirts so I'm changing so I don't gross you out

too much."

"You don't gross me out," El said, almost in a whisper. "It's not a problem."

"Um, I'll be back in a couple of minutes. I need to, um..." El excused herself to relieve her bladder. A few minutes later Mike heard a loud yelp. "My ankle!" El cried. Mike followed the sound of her voice. She was lying on the ground, a sizeable hole near her foot that in the dark would have been impossible to see. Mike picked her up and carried her back to the log. He palpated her entire ankle area, removing her shoe and feeling for anything that might be out of place. She hissed in pain but he thought it was only a bad sprain. It hurt to put weight on it though so he was glad they were finished with working for the day and it was too dark to hike anymore. He hoped she felt better in the morning. She was crying now, the stress of the day finally hitting her.

Mike looked down at her. She was wearing shorts (*why shorts in October?*) and he noticed goosebumps on her legs. It had gotten considerably cooler since they had gotten to their campsite and while he was sweaty from working, she had been sitting and didn't have the chance to get her blood flowing as much as his. He felt bad for her again. She was so small and it was getting cold.

"You look cold. I have some sweatpants in my bag if you want them. I brought them just in case. I don't want you to be cold."

El sniffed, trying to quell her tears. "Really? That would be great." El smiled at him as he found the pants in his bag. "I want to take these shorts off first though and I don't know if I can get them off. Not sure I can get the pants on either, now that I think about it. Could you please help me? I'll be really fast. I just need you to hold me up while I get my shorts down and the pants up."

Mike gulped. Obviously he could do that but thinking about holding El while she was taking her shorts off was short circuiting his brain a bit.

"Just pretend I'm in a swimsuit. I'm not wearing fancy panties or anything."

Panties. Oh Christ.

"Okay. Here, I'll help you stand up. Whatever you need me to do." He pulled her up from her seat and she stood on her good foot. He held her up while she unbuttoned her shorts and pushed them down. They fell to her ankles and he helped her step out of them. Then he helped her sit back down and she put the pants on, getting both ankles through the elastic cuffs before having him stand her back up.

"I need you to pull them up." She was blushing so hard but it was the only way. Mike reached down and pulled the pants up over her thighs, then her hips. His fingers brushed her backside as he pulled the pants into place and she thought she was going to explode. She was looking at him the entire time, their faces so close together.

"Is that better, El?" Mike asked, ripping himself from his trance and helping her sit back down.

"Yes. Thanks."

They both sat on the log for a little while until Mike remembered that his mom had packed some food that if he didn't eat today might not be good tomorrow.

"Hey, are you hungry? My mom packed food. We should eat it."

"What is it?" El asked. She was starving but didn't want to seem overeager.

Mike rummaged through the top of his backpack, removing a foil wrapped package, a plastic container, a resealable bag, and another smaller foil package. They had plenty of water in their water bottles which were sitting next to them.

"We've got a turkey wrap, hummus and carrot sticks, and this package has oatmeal cookies. We can save the cookies since they won't go bad but we should eat the rest tonight."

"Your mom is amazing." El didn't even have any food because she thought the group would provide it. She didn't plan for getting lost.

"Here, this is cut in half so you can have whichever side you want."

Mike offered the bigger foil package to El. She took her half and they started eating.

They ate without speaking, both watching the fire. Mike was feeling the fatigue of setting up camp earlier and El was coming down from the adrenaline rush of hurting herself while she was lost. She was tired. It was nice to just sit quietly and watch the fire. Mike was easy to just sit quietly with.

They finished their meal and were both yawning so Mike helped El to the tent. She removed her other shoe and crawled into the tent while he went back to collect their backpacks and make sure the fire wouldn't get out of control. After setting the bags under the tarp, he took off his own shoes and crawled inside the tent. El was in her sleeping bag.

"You didn't have to give me the air mattress. It's yours." El murmured as he climbed into his sleeping bag.

"I know. I want you to sleep on it. I'll be fine. I'll sleep better knowing you're comfortable." He bluntly stated. He was tired and cringed at himself for being so open.

They were lying side by side, each in their own sleeping bags. "Hey, Mike?" El whispered. "Why again did you join this club?"

"Well, my dad used to do this when he was younger. He'd go hike a long part of the Appalachian Trail with a couple of his friends. They'd go mountain climbing. All that stuff. I'm mainly trying to give it one more shot to do something he'll be proud of me for before I go to college. I know it's stupid. He did buy me all this stuff for Christmas though so maybe he's sort of happy I'm doing it."

El was silent for a minute, thinking. "You said you *mainly* were doing it to impress your dad? Is there another reason?"

"It's stupid."

"Mike. Tell me"

"I'm trying to put on some muscle. I'm too skinny. I don't want to be alone forever." He paused for a moment. "I hope you are warm

enough tonight. I hope you sleep well."

"I hope you do too." El tried to snuggle into her sleeping bag.

"Goodnight, El." Mike zipped up his bag and snuggled in.

"Night, Mike."

In the distance, thunder rumbled.

A/N: Looks like they're in for nasty weather...

3. Chapter 3

El awoke with a start. The wind was howling and she could hear thunder. It didn't sound like it was raining yet though. She was *cold*. She had never felt so cold. Her sleeping bag wasn't doing a very good job of keeping her warm and she was shivering.

Mike heard her rustling about trying to get comfortable. He could also hear the wind. It sounded like they might be in for more than just a rainstorm. He checked his watch. It was 2:00 a.m.

"I'm so cold. I don't know if I'm going to make it." El grumbled. Mike turned on his flashlight and set it so that it was pointing at the ceiling of the tent and illuminating their immediate surroundings.

"I'm cold too. If it starts raining it's only going to get colder."

"Can I tell you something? I'm afraid of storms. Like, *afraid*." El said, her voice almost a whisper as she listened to the coming onslaught. Mike crawled out of the tent to rummage through his backpack.

"What are you doing?" El asked from inside the tent. She was sitting up with her sleeping bag wrapped around her.

"I'm looking for a jacket I packed."

El watched from the door of the tent. It had started raining. The wind was the scariest part though. El had never liked storms and being outside in one was not something she ever wanted to do. Mike glanced over at her and saw the fear written on her face.

"Hey, El? Why don't you work on zipping the bags together. Maybe we can stay warmer that way. I know it's not ideal but we still have a long way to go until morning and this storm is going to make it worse." He smiled sympathetically at her, really only wanting to give her something to do to take her mind off of the current weather situation.

She nodded and crawled back into the tent, moving the flashlight and unzipping both bags so she could work on zipping them together. She

had just finished and was trying to get them back into place so they would both be able to get into them, or it, since it was one bag now, when thunder boomed and she heard Mike curse. There was a ripping sound and suddenly rain was hitting the roof of their small tent.

She crawled back out. The wind had pulled the upper tarp out of the ground on one side, being so forceful that it ripped it out, stakes and all. Mike was trying to grab the edge and pull it back down. He was already soaked but had caught the side that was flapping in the gusting wind and was trying to pull it down so he could hammer it back into place.

"Mike!" El called from where she stood.

"El, I've got it! Get back in the tent. There's lightning!"

She watched him struggle with the tarp but he was taking care of it. He had one stake firmly hammered back into the ground and was working on another one. At that moment there was a loud bang and a blinding flash of light. El heard the crashing sound before she realized what was happening. Lightning had struck a tree that was very near Mike and it was falling quickly toward his head. Mike looked up, frozen. He saw the tree speeding toward him and he knew he didn't have time to get out of the way. He braced himself.

But the tree didn't fall on him. He had closed his eyes (*when had he done that?*) and opened them to see the tree hovering in midair about five feet from his head. Then it moved away from him, landing on the ground out of their way completely. Mike looked around. El was standing beside the tent, her right arm outstretched. The look on her face was one of determined focus. Blood was trickling from her left nostril.

Mike was in shock. He had gotten the tarp back in place before the tree fell but now he couldn't move. He stared at her as cold rain swiftly fell onto his person.

"Mike, I'm sorry." She was crying even as she was moving toward him. He felt her put her arm around his shoulder and begin to pull him back into his tent. She was limping. He heard her sniffle and that broke him from his state of disbelief.

"El?" He could only look at her questioningly. They were under the tarp and out of the rain. Mike was wet from head to toe.

"Do you have some dry clothes you can put on? You said you brought extra shirts. Find one and change. You will get sick." El wasn't used to giving orders but she could tell Mike was shocked and someone had to make sure he took care of himself. He got a shirt and a pair of jogging pants out of his bag and started to change clothes. El gave him some privacy and went back into the smaller tent. She knew she was going to have to explain herself and she was already worried that she was about to lose her first and only friend.

A few minutes later Mike's head appeared in the doorway of the tent. He seemed tentative but the cold pushed him inside. He didn't say anything as he got into the sleeping bag. El saw that he was holding a fleece jacket.

"El, how did you do that? And please don't say you can't tell me. That tree was going to hit me and it just flew away. How did it do that?" His eyes didn't look accusatory. They looked wonderstruck. His words sounded soft, almost reverent.

El looked down at her hands. She rubbed them together, having been rained on herself while she was outside the tent. She was cold and was scared.

"I'm not a normal person, Mike. I can control it better now that I'm older but when I get highly emotional sometimes I still do things I don't mean to do. I've always been able to move things with my mind. I think my real parents must have been government test subjects or something because when I was little I spent a lot of time in a hospital but I wasn't sick. They would do tests on me and it was very scary and sometimes things would happen like the lights would go out or all of the electronics would get fried. It always happened when I was scared. I think this tattoo I have is because they were going to use me for something, or at least planned to someday. A lady that worked there snuck me out one day and I never went back. I was put into foster care when she was murdered. I had been hiding and they didn't find me. But later social services did find me and that started my stint of being shipped around from place to place. No one ever seemed to want me for long." Her teeth were chattering.

Mike scooted closer to her in the bag. He draped the jacket he had been holding over her shoulders.

"No, you're cold too. You wear it." El protested.

"El, you just saved my life. And you are freezing. Put it on."

She slipped her arms into the soft fabric. She did feel warmer almost immediately.

"Anyway, I try to hide it. I'm afraid of what might happen if people knew what I can do. Everyone already thinks of me as a freak. I don't want to prove them right. Please don't tell anyone, Mike. I understand if you don't want to be my friend anymore though."

"Why wouldn't I want to be your friend? You literally just saved my life. El, I promise you that I want to be your friend. And I don't break promises."

Thunder exploded loudly just then, causing El to shriek and scoot closer to Mike. It was involuntary but he didn't mind. He could still hear her teeth chattering. She was still shivering.

"I hate this." She had her legs pulled up as close to her as she could get them, making herself as small as possible. She crossed her arms over her knees and buried her head in them. Mike could hear her crying.

Come on, Mike. You can do this.

Mike hesitantly put his arm around her shoulders. He could feel her shaking. The wind was still screaming outside. He had never been in a hurricane but he imagined this was what one sounded like. He pulled her closer to him and added his other arm, holding her as they listened to the storm.

"I'm still so cold." El looked at him with tears in her eyes.

"Lie back." Mike said softly as he moved them down in the sleeping bag so he could pull it around both of them, only their heads sticking out of it. He pulled her against him.

"Is this okay? I can try to keep you warm." Mike asked, ready to move away if she wasn't comfortable with it.

"Yes. This is better already. Thank you." She sighed, one of those long sighs after a crying spell, and he could feel her start to relax a little.

Things had gotten heavy rather quickly. Mike could tell she was still a little worried about having shown him some of what she thought made her so weird. He was amazed by her though. He had actually been amazed by her before he knew what she could do but now he felt like it was his job to make sure she was protected from anyone who might try to harm her. Kids at school, the government, whomever. He wouldn't let it happen.

They were lying together still listening to the storm. The tarp had stayed in place but the rain and wind hadn't let up.

"So you're like a superhero?" Mike tried to lighten the mood.

"Hardly."

"Right. You're a Jedi." She giggled. Mike's heart skipped a beat. It was a melodious sound, her laugh.

El yawned again. Mike was lying on his back and she had rolled to her side so that his arm was around her and her head was on the side of his chest. Without thinking she moved her arm over his torso, essentially hugging him.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I got too comfortable." El pulled her arm back.

"It's okay. You can stay like that if you want. Try to go to sleep. I'll stay awake and if the storm gets worse I'll wake you up. I'll keep watch." He gently took her wrist and put her arm back over him. He felt her snuggle closer.

Mike did lie awake trying to keep watch but his eyelids grew heavy after a while and he fell asleep, El still semi-wrapped around him. It was still dark out when the storm picked up once again and thunder crashed, waking both of them with a jolt. El was beside herself.

"Mike, if something else crashes down I won't see it. I won't be able to

stop it!" She was making herself sick with worry.

"That's not going to happen again. We'll be okay. Just a little longer and we can try to get help." They were both sitting up now, the bag still pulled close to them to try to stay warm. Again the thunder rumbled loudly, causing El to jump almost into Mike's lap. She was shaking again, though not from cold this time. Her fear was getting the best of her. Mike tried his best to comfort her but every time the wind would howl or the thunder echoed she would start trembling again. She had her head buried in the crook of his neck. She could feel his Adam's apple move when he swallowed and could feel the vibration of his voice as he tried to calm her down.

"El, look at me." Mike felt her lift her head and he looked into her eyes. "We're going to be okay. I promise." She still had tears in her eyes but he could see something else...hope maybe? She was still hanging on to him as tightly as she had been, having gripped him tighter every time the thunder came close. He kissed her head, and then rested his forehead on hers, trying to calm her more. She kissed his cheek. He kissed hers.

El suddenly felt hot, in a good way. Mike being so close to her was making her feel lightheaded and when he kissed her head she had kissed his cheek without thinking about it. He was right there in front of her and it made her feel nice inside when she did it. Then he kissed her cheek and her stomach did back flips. She was quickly forgetting about the storm outside, focusing more on the feelings that were storming through her body. His face was so close to hers. She nuzzled her nose into it. She was surprised when he did it back, causing a slight gasp to escape. Their lips were very close together now.

"El?"

"Yes?" She breathed, never moving her face away from where it was, her nose still nuzzling his cheek.

"Can I kiss you?"

"Yeah." Her breath caught in her throat, causing her to only be able to nod slightly and whisper softly. His head tilted slightly and she felt

his lips on hers, her own working together with his as they kissed as though they had been doing it for years. Of course it was her first kiss but it felt natural, like she was supposed to kiss Mike. Like her lips were made to do that, with him. Maybe only with him. She felt hazy and unworried and happy, all feelings she was not used to feeling. When he moved his hand to her hair and she felt his nails scrape her head gently she felt the most amazing shiver move throughout her body. She had forgotten completely about the storm.

A/N: I think maybe two more chapters. Three at most. Thanks for reading!

4. Chapter 4

Their kiss deepened and El thought she might never feel as happy as she did at that moment. Her hand reached for his hair, feeling the soft curls that were dampened still from the rain. Mike pulled her closer as they continued kissing. El could only think about how his lips felt and how it felt to be pressed against his chest. The thunder wasn't bothering her, at least not at that instant.

Eventually they both found that they were lacking for air so their kiss had to end. They parted but kept their faces close for a bit, both of them surprised and overwhelmed by the intensity of their first kiss. Mike grinned and El laughed nervously.

"Wow." She murmured.

"Are you still afraid?" Mike asked, still holding her but now in a more relaxed position.

"I'm not right now." El replied, her voice still unable to find its full volume.

"I'm exhausted. Do you want to try to sleep again?" Mike asked. He was trying to scoot back down into the sleeping bag.

"Sleep would be amazing." El agreed. She turned to her side, facing away from Mike, and slid into the bag as well.

She was lying there thinking about the fact that she had just had her first kiss, and with someone who knew her secret, and she was suddenly overwhelmed with emotion. She felt tears running down her cheeks and tried to stifle her sniffles so Mike wouldn't worry. Of course he heard her. He turned toward her, his body wrapping around her smaller one.

"What's wrong, El?" Mike asked. He nudged her head so that she would lift it and he could slide his arm underneath her so she could use it as a pillow.

"Nothing is wrong."

"Are you okay?" He continued, still listening to her occasional snuffles.

"Yes."

"What is it?" Mike wanted to know.

"It's embarrassing."

"You know I wouldn't make fun of you, El."

She sighed. Mike's arm under her head felt strong but comfortable. "I've just never been held like this. I've never gotten to fall asleep feeling so safe."

Mike didn't say anything. He just hugged her tightly and they drifted to sleep.

The intensity of the storm dulled at some point while Mike and El were asleep but the rain didn't stop its torment of the area. They had slept surprisingly well once they had finally given in to slumber and they didn't wake until 10:00 the next morning, according to Mike's watch. They weren't expecting that the rain would still be falling hard. Another fire was out of the question.

El's ankle was still sore but she was managing to hobble around and they had both been able to leave the tent for a few minutes to take care of morning bathroom rituals. Mike had even brought a toothbrush. They shared it. Neither of them wanted to admit that it was a little gross but their mouths felt fresher and they had already kissed the night before so their teenage minds justified the act.

The constant rain made it seem colder than it was so they had to stay bundled in the sleeping bag all day. They talked a lot. Mike told her about his plans for the future, how he hoped to get into a good school somewhere other than anywhere in Indiana. He wanted a change from the small town, backwoods, backwater lifestyle that Hawkins offered. He wanted to be a pathologist but he also liked writing.

As they lay in the bag talking, El told him that she had been moved around so much that she didn't care as much *where* she lived as she did *who* she lived with. She just needed to know at the end of the day

that she was loved and was safe. Mike thought that was sad. He had always had that, even with his arguments with his father and the lack of actually *doing* things with him. The man was always there and he always made sure they were well taken care of. El had moved on to how she felt about her new dad and Mike found himself reaching for her hand. He laced her fingers in his and looked at her, smiling as she continued to tell him about how she liked having someone who was patient with her but it still felt weird and she was always worried that he was going to turn out like everyone else and decide he didn't want her anymore.

"Does he know about what you can do?" The question had suddenly struck Mike and he interrupted her to ask.

"He does. That's how he came into my life. He was working on some things for the government and he stumbled across some documents that led him to me. I guess they had been keeping tabs on me. He has some friends who work for the government, you know, higher up, and they were sympathetic to me and helped him get me out of the foster home I was in and helped him get documents that made him my father so that no one could take me away from him. I feel very lucky but I still worry that I'll do something wrong and he will send me away."

"It sounds like he knew what he was getting into. I don't think you need to worry so much, El. I don't know what kind of people you had to grow up around but I can't imagine you ever doing anything that would make someone want to send you away from them. They must have all been bad people, because you definitely are one of the good ones." El smiled but she looked away. His compliments were something she was in no way accustomed to hearing. She wasn't sure how to react.

The morning gave way to afternoon and still the rain had not let up. Mike knew there was little chance that they would be found that day but he didn't want to say anything just yet. El had seemed more relaxed all morning and he didn't want to reignite her fears.

"I'm hungry." El had felt her stomach growling.

"So am I. I have the cookies my mom packed. We can eat those."

Mike went out into the tarp area to find the cookies that were in his backpack. El was sitting in the sleeping bag still when she heard him shout.

"What's wrong?" She yelled from her position in the tent. Mike appeared at the door, a huge grin on his face.

"Nothing! I just remembered that I packed three bags of freeze dried chicken and rice so if I can get my camp stove to light so we can boil some water we can actually eat today." He seemed ecstatic. El also thought chicken and rice sounded better than just cookies. "I'm going to be under the tarp here trying to get this stove to work." Mike said as he disappeared from the door of the tent. El climbed out and watched him. She was interested in this little stove and wanted to see how it worked. He had a little fuel source that hooked into the ignition. He just had to unscrew the safety cap. He tried as hard as he could but it wouldn't budge. He was getting frustrated. He looked up at El and she could see that he was disappointed and he looked like someone had just killed his dog.

"Here, stand back." El said. Mike watched as she glared at the cap. He followed her gaze and watched as the cap started to turn, clearly loosened enough that he could take it off.

"See if that helped." Mike took off the cap and got everything working properly. He poured some water from one of their bottles into the pot and turned on the flame.

"That was awesome. I don't even know what to say." Mike stood up, crossed to her where she was standing a few feet away, and hugged her tightly, pulling her off her feet slightly. He set her back down after a few seconds but before he let her go he kissed her, shortly but sweetly. "Thanks, El." He then used his sleeve to wipe away a smidge of blood that had trickled out of her nose.

El was once again overcome with so many feelings. She had never had anyone wipe her nose, or hug her because they wanted to, definitely had never had anyone want to kiss her. She had never known that she could feel happy emotions. She took a few deep breaths to pull herself together before she went to where Mike was to watch him cook their food.

"See, this package of food is already cooked but then they use a machine to pull all of the water out. So all we have to do is add the right amount of boiling water, and it's neat because we can just pour it into the same package the food came in, and let it sit for a few minutes and it will rehydrate and it'll be like actual chicken and rice we made at home. Well, maybe not as good as that, but we're hungry so I'm sure it will taste good to us." Mike was smiling and talking excitedly. She had saved his life and he was happy that he could do something in return, even if it was only making them some food.

"Do you have a fork or anything?" El asked, not wanting to have to use their hands to reach into the bag of rice.

He laughed a little. "You know I do. I brought *everything*." He smirked at her and smiled when she blushed.

They could smell the food and both of their mouths were watering. They had known they were hungry but until they smelled actual food neither of them realized how hungry they were. The events of the previous night had caused them both to have rushes of adrenaline. Mike rebuilding the outer tarp tent in the pouring rain and El catching and moving the tree had caused both of them to use any calorie reserves they had so now they were feeling the effects of so much energy used.

"I think it's finished. Let's go back into the tent. I'm cold." Mike turned off his stove and got his fork out of his backpack. Once again they would have to share but they currently were lost in the woods so just having a fork at all was a luxury.

They settled in place back in their sleeping bag and passed the package of food back and forth between them as they took turns taking bites.

"Do you think they're looking for us? I wonder if they even know we're gone." El said softly.

"I don't know. I'm sure they had a checklist but with this storm I don't know what they might do. I don't even know if they continued the hike after last night was so bad. But we will get out of here. If nothing else, when your foot is better we will find our own way out.

Together."

"You're not saying it, but I know we're going to have to spend the night here again." El quietly stated.

Mike sighed and looked at the ground. "Yeah, I think we are. I didn't want to scare you so I hadn't mentioned it yet."

"It's okay, Mike. Hopefully tonight won't be as bad as last night." She was quiet for a moment. "And last night turned out to not be *all* bad." She said, barely audible but Mike heard her.

They finished their rice and got back into the sleeping bag. They were both still tired from the night before.

"Thanks for making food, Mike." El said as she snuggled into the bag. "I feel better now."

"I'm glad. It's literally the least I could do. Really." She giggled at him again which made his heart race. He cuddled into her. She accepted gladly. He had said he was cold but to her he felt warm and it was nice to feel him against her.

The rain hitting the tarp above them made a consistent tapping noise and they were lulled to sleep by the patter of the drops. When they awoke it was dark outside. Mike wished he could get a fire going to warm them up but there was no place to build one and the wetness of the fire pit they had built made it impossible to use at the time. El was rubbing her hands together, trying to make them feel warmer.

"I'm sorry it's so cold." Mike said, he put his hands on hers to try to help warm them.

"It's not your fault. You can't control the weather."

"Still, I don't want you to be cold." They were silent for a few moments.

"Mike, do you think the kids at school will say mean things to us when we get back because we were lost together and spent so much time alone together?" El wondered. She had been thinking about it, how the kids at school would probably tease them, especially Mike.

He'd get teased for being alone with the weird girl. Who knew what rumors they would start?

"I don't care what anyone says to me, El. Let them think whatever they want to think. We know the truth of our time out here. We know what we mean to each other." Mike realized he had probably used the wrong words. He didn't want to scare her. He was falling though. Falling hard.

"What do we mean to each other?" She wasn't going to let that one slide. He could tell.

"I mean, I feel like we're connected. You know? Like the first time I talked to you I felt like I had known you forever, even though I didn't know anything about you really. And before I ever talked to you I was always trying to see where you were, at school I mean. Like at lunch when you'd always leave or I'd see you in class but I was too much of a mouthbreather to say anything to you. I thought about you a lot. And now that I *do* know you better I like you even more. You're kind and honest and helpful and smart. I like to hear you laugh and you have a beautiful smile. Well, I mean actually *everything* about you is beautiful but I don't want to sound creepy or anything." Mike was starting to think he was rambling. El just looked down.

"Wow. No one has ever said anything like that to me before. No one has ever told me anything *good* about myself. I'm glad that I'm lost with you, Mike. I'm glad you're the one who is here with me. You make me feel like I'm not alone and I never feel that way." Her voice was guarded, like she thought she might cry so she had to keep it in check.

"I really like you, El." Mike said, smiling warmly.

"I really like you too, Mike. I've never told anyone my age my secret. I'm glad you know. It makes me feel better about myself. I'm lost in the woods, going on my second night, and I've never felt happier feelings than these last two days. I mean, I don't want to be lost but you've made me feel happy. I like feeling happy."

They had moved closer to each other in the bag when Mike had put his hands on El's to warm them. As they had talked Mike had moved

himself so that he was once again holding her, her head on his chest just below his chin.

"I hope we get found soon but I wouldn't want to be lost with anyone else either, El." Mike said softly. He could feel her hair tickling his face next to his jaw. He really wanted to kiss her again but he was afraid that their predicament of sharing the sleeping bag might make it seem to her that he was going to try to do more, which he wasn't. Not that he wouldn't *want* to, he just wasn't the type of guy to take advantage of a situation. She sensed his conflict and lifted her head to look at him. She was still firmly tucked into his side, just raising her head enough so that their eyes could meet.

"Is something wrong?" She asked, her brow furrowing a bit. He couldn't see a lot due to the darkness but he could tell where she was in space. He could tell where all of her facial features were.

"Everything is fine." His voice faltered a bit.

"Are you sure? Did I do something?" She sounded worried.

"Definitely not, El." He paused, wondering if he should just tell her what was bothering him. "Look, I want to kiss you again but I know that's asking for a lot and I didn't want you to think I wanted more, I mean, I'd *totally* want more, but it's your body your rules and I would never want you to think I would take advantage of you. You're just so pretty and you smell good even though we're lost in the woods and you feel really nice lying up against me and..." She cut him off, her lips brushing gently against his and stopping the words spewing from his mouth. He returned her kiss, deepening it just a little as he shifted so that they were both lying on their sides, facing each other. His arms wrapped around her and she felt his tongue graze her lower lip. She felt it in her toes.

Mike knew that they couldn't get too carried away. They were lost, yes, but that didn't make their sharing a sleeping bag in a small tent all alone any less romantic. It would be too easy to go too far and despite how his body was screaming at him that he needed *more* he held back. Even when he could tell that she was having trouble not getting caught up in the moment as well he held the ground for both of them.

"Mike." She said, pulling back and breathless.

"I know. We have to stop. Or at least slow way down."

"I know." She agreed. Her tone of voice said that she was disappointed in the fact but she definitely knew what they shouldn't do.

"Hey, El?" Mike lifted her chin, she had hung her head.

"I'm not going anywhere. Unless that's what you want. There will be time. We have time." He smiled, his eyes never looking away from hers. "Come here." He pulled her to him and they just cuddled. Occasionally they would make out again but both of them were hyperaware that they had to keep it in control. Both of them were also hyperaware of what they wanted to happen someday in the future.

A/N: Next chapter, time to find a way home. Thanks again for reading. I hope it's enjoyable!

5. Chapter 5

It looked like the rain would never let up as Saturday became Sunday. Mike and El were going to have to face the very real possibility that they might have to spend yet another night in the same place. El's ankle was feeling a bit better but Mike still saw a noticeable limp when he watched her walk anywhere so he didn't want to risk injuring her more. He knew that their supply of food only consisted now of two packages of freeze dried chicken and rice and the cookies his mother had sent with him. If they didn't get a chance to start finding their way back tomorrow they might have to go hungry. They'd need energy if they had to hike to find a road or another way out of the forest. Their water supply was also running low, but there was plenty of fresh water near them. Mike would just have to take an empty bottle and fill it, then boil the contents and pour the safe water into another bottle.

They had four liter sized water bottles between them so Mike gathered the two most empty ones and started toward the stream nearest to them.

"I'll be back soon. I need to fill these so we can sterilize the water and have more drinking water and water to cook with. If you hear me yell, I've died." Mike kidded her.

"Shut up. Don't say that." El wasn't in the mood to joke about their predicament. "Please be careful." Her worried expression melted his heart a little.

Mike trekked carefully down the muddy embankment to the creek. The rains had caused what was once a lazy stream to now be a swiftly moving current that had seemed to double in size. He cautiously knelt down by the water's edge and filled the bottles, noting how the water was moving so quickly that if he hadn't had a strong hold on the bottle it would have easily been torn from his hand and sent floating away. He hoped they could find a way around this if they got a chance to hike out tomorrow. It would be a risky idea to try to cross this body of water now. It had been so small when they crossed it the first time.

He slipped a couple of times on his way back to the campsite, his knees muddy upon his return. He had the water though so he was wearing a dopey grin when El saw him. She had already gotten the stove ready and was just waiting on the water to pour into the pot. She felt happy that she could help in any way. Mike had been doing most of the work the entire time since her ankle was hurting. She wanted to lighten the load.

The first batch of water was used to rehydrate their food for the day. While it was rehydrating in the package Mike went back to the creek to refill the bottle once more. He slipped again but was able to get the water he'd been seeking. But his pants were completely muddy now and he would have to take them off before he could get into the sleeping bag. They were beyond *just a little dirty*. He was glad he had shorts on underneath them. He'd be cold but at least he wouldn't be as likely to embarrass himself.

They boiled the remainder of the water and lidded the pot so it could cool before it was poured back into the clean bottles. El went back into the tent.

"Aren't you coming?" She asked, seeing how Mike was still lingering in the tarp area.

"I am. I'm all muddy so I have to take off these pants. I'm sorry."

"You don't have to be sorry. It's not a big deal." She smiled at him, trying to make him feel better about what clearly was a situation that was causing him to doubt himself. She crawled into the tent with the bag of food and waited on Mike to join her. It didn't take him long. He looked cold now that his legs were only covered with shorts, his lower legs completely exposed to the chill. She pulled back the edge of the bag so he could get in more easily. Once he was settled she tucked the bag around his legs, trying to help him feel warmer.

"Better?" She asked hopefully.

"Better." He smiled. She handed him the bag of food and they commenced their meal for the day.

They listened to the rain for hours. The syncopated rhythm was

soothing and both of them felt drowsy, like being in the Doldrums from *The Phantom Tollbooth*. They didn't have to force conversation, just being quiet was comfortable. But they did talk, still learning about each other.

"What's your favorite food?" Mike asked, starting a mental checklist of Everything El.

"You'll laugh, but Eggos are my favorite food. I'm an eternal 6-year-old." They both chuckled.

"I like Eggos too. Definitely not a bad choice. What's your favorite color?" He continued.

"I used to say pink, always pink. But I like purple too. I guess I'm maturing." She smiled and shook her head.

"What's your favorite book?"

"Hmm, that's harder. I'll have to think for a minute. I love lots of books." Her face scrunched up as she thought about what her answer would be. Mike thought it was one of the cutest things he'd ever seen.

"This is hard! I like so many. I like *To Kill a Mockingbird*, but I like *The Grapes of Wrath* as well. I love Stephen King, Dr. Seuss. I love the existential comedy of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* and *Waiting for Godot*. *Blubber* by Judy Blume. Honestly, Mike, I don't know if I could ever have just one answer to that question. I simply love to read."

"Okay, well what's your favorite song then?" He was making mental notes of everything she was saying.

"That's hard too! I love music. Just looking at me you'd never know and I doubt I'd ever do it publically but I love to sing. I dance when I'm alone but I wouldn't call myself a dancer. I just like how the music makes me feel."

"Would you sing for me?" He asked, hoping she would say yes.

"I don't know...I'm not that great."

"Oh, come on. Please?" He gave her some sad puppy eyes and she surrendered.

"Okay." She was quiet. "What do you want to hear?"

"Anything."

El took a sip of water. She sat up straight, looking at Mike. His face looked anticipatory. She started to sing...

*You with the sad eyes
Don't be discouraged
Oh I realize
It's hard to take courage
In a world full of people
You can lose sight of it all
And the darkness inside you
Can make you feel so small*

*But I see your true colors
Shining through
I see your true colors
And that's why I love you
So don't be afraid to let them show
Your true colors
True colors are beautiful,
Like a rainbow...*

Mike was floored as he listened to El sing *True Colors* by Cyndi Lauper. Her voice was strong but sweet, emotion pouring from her. She sang the whole song and Mike felt tears start to sting his eyes. It was really beautiful. She didn't even have music to back her up. Just El and her voice and him listening to every word.

She finished the song and he was quiet. She had kind of avoided eye contact while she was singing, worried that she wouldn't be good and not wanting to see that reflected in his eyes. She looked at him and saw that he was wiping away a few tears.

"Are you okay?" She asked.

"I'm okay. I'm better than okay. That was really beautiful, El. You have a lovely voice." He wiped his tears again. "God, I'm such a dork."

"No you're not, Mike. You're not." She took his hand in hers, offering him a shy smile as he looked back up at her.

"Thanks."

"What about you?" She asked. "What are your favorite things?"

"My favorite color is blue. I like my mom's lasagna. I love *The Lord of the Rings*. I love Stephen King too." He smiled at her, knowing they shared a favorite author. "I don't know if I have a favorite song but I like The Smiths, Pink Floyd, and Prince. I like a lot of music but I don't know that I can narrow it down. I can't sing as well as you." He laughed.

He got a little more serious as they sat there, still listening to the rain. "Would you tell me what the biggest thing you've ever moved with your mind was? You don't have to. I'm just curious."

She thought for a minute. She didn't want to scare him but she also didn't want to lie to him.

"I once moved a car out of the way when it was coming right at me. The foster family I was with had sent me to the store to get some milk and a couple of other things they needed to make dinner. It was dark out already by the time I was on my way back and I was on the sidewalk but all of a sudden there was a car that came over the curb right at me. I think the driver must have been drunk because there was no other traffic. It scared me and before I knew what happened I had made it lift off the ground and it shot to the other side of the street. It hit a stop sign from a weird angle but the driver wasn't hurt. I had dropped the groceries and even though I picked them all up the family I was with wouldn't let me eat dinner with them that night because the bag was torn and the milk was dented. So I guess that's the biggest thing I've moved."

Mike stared at her. He could feel the bitterness rising at the thought of her not getting to eat dinner because of a ripped grocery bag. It made his heart ache. He pulled her into a hug.

"You deserved better than that." He said into her hair softly. "I'm sorry you never had anyone. I think you're the best."

She smiled through the tears that were forming and buried her head in his shoulder, her arms also hugging him tightly.

Mike didn't want El's spirits to go down. He hadn't realized that some of his questions might open old wounds. She seemed fine but hearing about her life before she had been adopted was hard for Mike so he figured it was even harder for her to tell him about it. He wanted to change the mood of the tent.

"Hey, how's your ankle doing?"

"It still hurts. I noticed that it's not as swollen so I think that's a good sign. I hope it feels better tomorrow." She replied.

"Here, put your foot in my lap. I can massage it for you."

"You don't have to do that, Mike."

"*I want* to. Give it to me. Otherwise I'm just going to have to pull you over here and hold you down." This caused her to giggle. She smirked at him before moving to rest her ankle on his thigh. "See," Mike continued, "that wasn't so hard." He grinned as he started gently massaging her ankle and foot, being careful to not push too hard.

El had never had a foot massage. She didn't know if she would be ticklish or if it would hurt. She was pleasantly surprised to find that it felt wonderful. Mike would move from her ankle to her heel and rub gently, applying pressure on her heel and the sole of her foot that made her feel shivers run up her entire body. He massaged her toes and she couldn't believe how good his fingers felt on her tiny digits. He would squeeze each toe gently before using his thumb and forefinger to rub small circles on them, his fingers lightly grazing her skin once he had massaged each toe. That should have been a ticklish sensation but it made her feel things in other places. He did the same thing to the top of her foot and she squirmed.

"Is everything okay?" He asked, continuing to ghost his fingers over her entire foot and making her whole body enter a state of excitation.

"That feels really good. I think you might need to stop." Her voice sounded breathy and he immediately understood. He stopped but left her foot where it was on his leg.

"I'm just going to put your sock back on your foot." Mike had removed it so that he could get a better grip. As he slid it back on El watched him and as soon as he was finished she climbed across and kissed him hard.

"I know what we can't do," she murmured into his ear as her hands went into his hair, "but can we at least do this?"

Mike answered her with actions instead of words.

The night went the same way as the previous night, with Mike and El doing their best to hold themselves back while also allowing themselves to canoodle enough to take the edge off a bit. They had talked earlier about what they would do if they woke up the next morning and the rain had finally stopped. They knew the plan. If the weather was good enough the next day they were going to get up and eat their last bag of chicken and rice, boiling more water while they were eating so it would be cool enough to pour into their bottles by the time they were ready to leave. They would pack everything up and try to head back in the direction of the original waterfall, the exploration of which had gotten them lost in the first place. Or they would look for any signs of a trail or a road or other civilization. They knew what they would do.

So since their plan was already in place they spent less time worrying about tomorrow and spent more time being alone with each other, both of them knowing that if they did find their way home the next day they wouldn't have the opportunity to be so sequestered again in the near-term future. They enjoyed each other's company, laughing as Mike told stories of silly things his friends had done, or just snuggling together and feeling how they felt against each other, making sense memories. The both slept well that night.

El awoke to the sound of birds chirping. She hadn't heard any birds singing the entire time they had been lost. She knew immediately that it wasn't raining anymore.

"Mike!" She whispered excitedly, trying to gently shake him awake. He looked at her groggily and she had the biggest smile on her face. "I think it stopped raining. Maybe we can find our way out of here."

He sat up and listened. He could hear the birds but he couldn't hear any rain. He hugged her close and kissed her forehead.

"We're going to find our way home."

"I want to do one thing first." El said. They crawled out of the tent to see the world without water falling on it for the first time in two days. She had her camera and was setting it up to take another picture. "I want to take a picture of us in front of our camp so we'll always remember." She was saying as she pushed the button on the timer.

"I'm pretty sure we'll always remember this, El, but that's still a good idea." He said as she sidled up next to him. He put his arm around her and the shutter snapped. "Let's take one more. Can you set it up again?"

She went back and pushed the button again, hurrying back to her place beside Mike. Instead of putting his arm around her though he pulled her into a kiss just as the picture took.

"That's what I wanted." He smiled brightly.

They set about doing the tasks they had discussed the day before. El was making the food while Mike got the tarp setup disassembled. He folded them back with the rope and tent stakes hidden in the folds, so nothing would harm El's camera while it was in her backpack.

He is so thoughtful. She thought as she watched him and he explained what he was doing.

They ate their food. El was already boiling more water for the day's hike while their food was reabsorbing the water she had previously boiled. When they were finished El helped Mike pack up everything else, the sleeping bags, his air mattress, his tent. She refilled the water bottles and he tucked his stove away in its case. They had everything and were ready to set off, hopeful that they were doing

the right thing.

"How are you feeling? Ready to do this?" Mike asked El.

"I'm feeling much better. I'm ready. We might have to go slow here and there but I feel strong enough to try."

The duo set off on their quest for home. Mike knew that the stream they had crossed to get to their camp was now a small river so they went the opposite direction, hoping to find some path that would lead them out of the forest.

A/N: So they're on their way. Will they find help or will they get even more lost?

6. Chapter 6

They had zig-zagged across a lot of forest, thinking things might look familiar and then realizing that they in fact were nothing they'd ever crossed. Every little body of water had become flooded the past couple of days and were practically impassable so they'd have to turn in another direction and continue their expedition. They were still optimistic, still hopeful that they would spot a road or a blaze marking a trail.

"How is your ankle holding up?" Mike asked as they continued to climb.

"It's okay. I might need to slow down just a little."

"Sure. We can go at whatever pace you need." Mike offered her his hand to help her step over a rock that was almost up to her knees.

It had been late morning by the time they had gotten everything packed back in the backpacks and had set off on their journey. Mike checked his watch from time to time, looking up at the sky and gauging where the sun was. So far he hadn't seen any signs of a trail or anything that looked like it might take them home. By around 3:00 he was getting disappointed. El could sense the change in his attitude.

"Mike, what's wrong?" She asked, stopping him and taking his hand.

"I haven't seen anything that looks like a trail or even a path. I'm starting to become afraid that we'll have to camp again. Only now we don't have any food. I don't know how long we'll be lost out here, El."

She knew he was worried because he was feeling like he needed to take care of her.

"Mike, I can take care of myself. If we have to spend another night we can do it. We'll still have each other. I won't waste away. We can try again tomorrow. Try to stay positive. You will think more clearly. Do you need a hug?" She had asked trying to make him laugh or smile but he just buried his face in her shoulder, dropping down since he

was so tall, and she felt him breathe a shaky breath into her neck as his arms hung on to her. She held him until he released her.

They did have to camp another night. Since it wasn't raining they only set up Mike's tent so they could save time the next morning when they started off again. Mike was trying to be positive but El could tell that he was not really feeling what he was saying. He was worried and disappointed and maybe a little scared. He did manage to find a small cave area, or maybe not a cave but a goodly sized indentation in some rocks that some tree limbs had been blown into at one time. The space was pretty dry so the wood in it was as well. Mike used El's hatchet to chop the wood into small enough pieces to burn.

"I hate to ask this, but can you use your powers to get some rocks for the fire pit?" Mike asked El.

"I could, but every time I use them I get really tired and since we don't have anything to eat, if I use them tonight I won't have any energy to hike tomorrow. I can find some the regular way. It might just take me a little longer. I'll start looking now."

Mike felt like an idiot. *Of course using her powers would make her tired. Why didn't you think of that?* He quickly finished chopping the wood so he could help her with the rocks. They made a smaller pit so they didn't have to use as much energy. It was only for one night anyway.

Once they had the fire started the October sun had already set. El had put Mike's fleece jacket back on and they were sitting on the ground by the fire, having been in the tent enough the past few days. She was sitting in the space between his outstretched legs, his arms around her. The warm fire felt nice on their bodies and they found themselves being gently overtaken by fatigue. Watching the fire put them in a trance-like state and they had to drag themselves to the tent to sleep. They snuggled together and slept until morning, the day's hike having been more strenuous than it seemed when they were hiking it. Once they stopped moving their bodies screamed for rest.

The weather was cooperative the next morning as well so they packed up their things and started again on their quest for home.

They seemed to be hiking upwards, not actively climbing but definitely headed more up than down. Every time they had tried to hike lower they were thwarted by raging streams. Mike was hoping to find anything that would help them and he thought maybe if they got high enough he could see out far and figure out which way they should go.

They had been hiking in silence for a while, the upgrade making them work more to catch their breath. El finally said what was on her mind.

"I'm worried about how you'll be treated when we get back to school. I don't want them to pick on you. I know you said you didn't care but *I* care. I don't want you to have to go through any sort of troubles because of *me*."

Mike turned around. He had been forging the "trail" they were on, making sure to push any branches back for her and to look for any holes or obstacles in the ground.

"Please don't worry about that. Look, it's like this. I only have a few friends and I love them, they're great, but I wouldn't even care if *they* made fun of me. When it comes to you I only care what *you* think about me. People will come and go, people will say things that aren't true, but they don't matter. *You* matter to me. Okay? So they can start rumors or pick on me, they can even try to beat me up, but none of it would ever make me change my mind about you. I promise. I...uh, I just care about you enough that no one else's opinion matters to me." *Jeez, I'm a coward.*

She was quiet for a moment. They had continued their climb. "I care about you too, Mike."

God, I want to stop and kiss her so much right now. Gotta keep moving though. Gotta get her out of here.

They kept moving upward. Mike had no idea how high they had traveled. The day was burning away and he still hadn't seen any trail. They saw an outcrop of rocks up ahead and headed for it. When they finally reached it Mike threw his hand back, signaling El to stop. They had come to what was a sheer drop off and if they took too

many more steps forward they would find themselves falling to certain death.

They both peered over the edge. The afternoon sun was starting to drop but was still high enough to see all the way down to the ground below, which looked to be more than 1500 feet straight down. Mike hadn't realized they had hiked so far up. He was feeling queasy at the thought of having to camp again, feeling like a failure for dragging El in the wrong direction...again. He was internally beating himself up when El's voice snapped him back.

"Mike, what's that?" She was pointing at something on the ground far below them. He looked, then squinted to try to make it clearer. Mike knew what that was. He knew *exactly* what that was.

"El, that's a road. It's a road! See the yellow line in the middle of it?" He sounded like he was getting excited and then quickly his demeanor changed. "But I don't know how to get to it. We're so far up here. I don't know how to get down there."

El thought about her options. They could continue to wander and hope they happened upon a trail or such, they could try to work their way down to the road, not knowing which way would take them there and which way would cause them to become *more* lost, or she could fix everything right now. Only that might really cause Mike to want nothing to do with her and it might not even work and end up killing them both. She looked at Mike's tired and crestfallen face.

"Mike, I might be able to get us down there. But it might not work. I want to let you choose. Do you want me to try to use my powers to get us to the road?" She was serious, her face somber.

"You can *do* that?"

"I possibly can. It's not really different than moving other things. It's just that if it doesn't work it will be us dropping and not some random object. It's your decision. It's *your* life."

Mike thought about it. He was tired of being lost. He wanted to sleep in a bed and he was hungry. He was cold. And he knew El felt the same way.

She's a freaking superhero, Mike. She's the most badass person you will ever know.

"Okay. What do I need to do?" Mike asked, his resolve set.

"Tighten your pack and can you help me tighten mine?" Mike did as he was asked, making sure her straps were as tight as he could get them without hurting her. "Now you'll have to hold on to me. Whatever you do, don't let go. When we get to the bottom I probably will be no good for anything. I probably won't even be able to stand. So can you please make sure, if I'm still alive, that I don't get hit by a car?"

Mike gulped. This was going to drain her completely.

"I will make sure you are safe. I won't let anything happen to you." Realization of what they were about to do was setting in quickly.

"Okay, then we just have to get close to the edge here and you have to hold on to me. Don't let go, Mike. Do *not* let go."

She's about to do this!

"El, wait." He cupped her cheek in his hand and kissed her, both of them making it count in case it was their last kiss. When he pulled away she smiled at him, her eyes lost in his.

"Ready?" She asked softly.

"Ready." He wrapped his arms around her tightly. Her arms went behind his neck and her fingers laced together. Mike felt her shake a little and then felt the sensation of being lifted off the ground. He fought every instinct he had that told him to let go and drop back to the earth but he didn't let go. He could see the trees moving past him and watched in awe as the road came more into view, looking less like a tiny line and more like a road. Still they were dropping, the rate seemingly controlled as they were moving past the trees at a consistent speed. It was only seconds but to Mike it seemed like hours, the fear of El using too much energy before they were on the ground rushing through him and making time seem to slow. Finally the road looked about twenty feet away, then ten feet, and then they

were on it, both dropping. Mike shouted in celebration before he looked down to see El.

She was bleeding from both nostrils and from her ears. Her eyes were closed and she was limp on the pavement. He immediately dropped to his knees to try to get her to respond.

"El? El! Are you okay? Oh, fuck! You have to wake up, El!" He pulled her to him and carried her to the side of the road, fearing oncoming cars at what was now dusk. He had thrown his pack off when he pulled her to the side of the road, slipping hers off as well, so he could hold her up against him. He cradled her in his arms and rocked her back and forth as he whispered nonsensically how great she was. He finally got himself together enough to really check her out. She was breathing though it was shallow. Her heart was definitely beating. He reached for his water bottle and poured some water on his shirt sleeve which he then used to start wiping blood from her sweet face. It took a while but he finally felt her stir. She was weak and could barely squeeze his hand back.

He knew he needed to try to flag down a vehicle to get them to anyone that could help them. Even getting to a phone would be helpful. He was grateful that it was night and he would see the headlights of any passing cars in enough time to try to get their attention. He kissed El's forehead, feeling how warm she was. Now he was even more worried because he could tell she was running a fever. He *had* to get her home.

Finally he saw lights in the distance. He gently laid El down in a patch of grass and stood by the side of the road, ready to jump out at the car if he had to. He hoped he didn't look too much like a crazy man. A car sped past him, not even slowing to look in his direction. Mike was pissed. He looked back at El, still lying exactly where he'd left her. He ran his hands through his hair. He was coming unglued at the prospect of no one helping them. They had come so far. Then he saw another set of headlights. He hoped beyond hope that this would be the one.

As the vehicle approached him he could see that it was a pickup truck. He started jumping up and down, waving his hands and trying to get the truck to stop. To his amazement the truck did slow down

and parked on the shoulder of the road. Mike ran to the driver's side window, making sure to not crowd the driver and seem like some sort of mountain murderer.

The window rolled down. Mike was standing about five feet away from the man.

"Can you please help me? My girlfriend and I have been lost for the last few days. We were on a hiking trip with Hawkins High School and we got lost and it has been raining and she's exhausted and I need to get her home. We need to get *home*."

The man looked at Mike. "I don't see a girlfriend."

"She's lying right over there with our backpacks. She is running fever and I really need to take care of her. Can you *please* help us?"

The man followed Mike's outstretched hand, seeing where he was pointing. He could see the backpacks and the girl lying listless on the side of the road.

"Get her and get in. I'll take you to the ranger station. It's just over this hill here."

Mike wasted no time. He ran and got their packs, tossing them in the back of the truck. He went back and picked El up in his arms, gently carrying her to the cab of the truck. He put her inside and then climbed in himself, pulling her back into him so he could feel her shallow breaths against his neck.

"Thank you so much."

"What happened to her? She looks like hell."

"It's been a long few days. We're out of food, she's so tired. She gets nosebleeds easily." Mike decided to not try to act like he couldn't still see blood on her face.

They pulled in to the ranger station and the man got out and went to knock on the cabin door. The ranger came out quickly, the man having explained what he'd found and the ranger was more than aware of the two kids that had gone missing the Friday before. It was

now Tuesday.

Mike carried El into the station and held her the entire time as the ranger called Mike's parents. El was beginning to wake up a little, which made Mike's heart feel like it was going to explode from his chest.

"Mike?" She asked, her voice barely audible.

"El, we're at the ranger's station. We're going home!"

She smiled at him, her eyes never leaving his. "I'm so tired."

"I know you are. You were so awesome. You were amazing." Mike whispered, his mouth close to her ear so only she would hear. "You can sleep. I've got you." He kissed her cheek and she closed her eyes. She still had blood on her face in places but she looked more peaceful than she had before.

It didn't take long for Mike's parents to arrive at the ranger's station, at least it didn't seem to compared to being in the woods for days. He didn't know El's phone number and she was in no shape to give it to him at the moment so he asked his parents when they got there if they could take El home. His mother took one look at the girl and the way Mike was holding her and knew that she would take this girl in herself if it turned out that her father wasn't home that night. They drove back to Hawkins, Mike and El in the backseat, Mike still holding her close, like he was afraid to let go. She had been in and out of sleep. His mother had given her some Tylenol that she kept in her purse to try to lower the fever.

Mike's mother had gone to high school with El's father so she knew him and knew when he moved back to Hawkins. She also knew where he lived, due to small town gossip and the way word got around about goings on. They pulled into the driveway. Mike eased El out of the car and carried her to the door, his mother tagging along to ring the bell for him.

El's adoptive father answered the door and looked surprised to see Mike standing there holding El, her face still a bit bloody. She was awake though, barely.

"Hey, Hop. I made it home." Hopper took her from Mike and held her close. She looked like a 4-year-old in his arms. He motioned with his head for Mike to come in. He wanted to know what had happened.

So Mike told him about the last few days. His mother had gone back out to the car to get El's backpack. Mike left out some things Hopper didn't really need to know but he told him how they had gotten lost and what she had done to save them. How she had saved him and that he knew her secret. He promised Hopper that she would always be safe with him and that he would do anything for her. El heard everything even though she didn't have the energy to join in the conversation. Her heart swelled hearing him tell her father how much she meant to him.

He was about to have to leave when El moved her head toward him, trying her best to get his attention. Of course, she always had Mike's attention.

"Mike." Her voice soft.

"I'm right here, El. What is it?" He knelt beside the sofa close to her face.

"I'll see you at school?"

He didn't care that her dad was right there. He kissed her, and not just some little peck, he tried to make her feel everything he felt for her. He pulled away and smiled at her.

"I'll be waiting for you."

A/N: Okay, let's see what happens when they return to school. Let me know what you think. I've certainly enjoyed writing this one.

7. Chapter 7

The next morning Mike awoke to the sound of the phone ringing. He had been ready to get out of bed anyway. He had planned on taking the rest of the week off school since he felt he needed time to recover. He knew El would need time and he didn't really want to go back until she was also ready. He was making his way down the stairs to find something for breakfast when he heard his mother's end of the phone conversation.

"Are you sure you wouldn't just want to bring her here? I can make sure she has lunch and dinner."

Mike stopped and listened harder.

"Okay, he seems fine. I'm sure he won't have a problem with it. Just give me an hour or so to get him up and fed and then he will be on his way over to you."

Mike wondered who *he* was and where *he* might be headed in an hour.

He entered the kitchen as his mother was placing the telephone back in the cradle. "Who was that, Mom?" He could see that she had bacon and eggs for him but he went to the freezer anyway, hoping to find some Eggos. He had been wanting to have some.

"That was Chief Hopper. He was scheduled to be off today so he could stay with Jane but there's been a break-in and he has to go work the case. He was wondering if you could come over today and stay with her since she's still recovering from your ordeal. He said she keeps asking for you. He doesn't want her to be alone. I don't know how she is so much worse off than you. What happened out there?"

"She's just exhausted, Mom. And we ran out of food. Just let me get dressed and I'll be there." Mike inhaled his breakfast and dashed up the stairs to put on some clothes.

He had his mom drop him off since he didn't have his own car but he didn't want to take hers and leave her with nothing. He rang the bell

and Hopper answered pretty quickly.

"Hi, sir. My mom said you would like for me to stay with El, I mean Jane, for the day while you have to work?"

"Yeah, She keeps asking for you. She's still pretty out of it, kid. I just need you to make sure she eats something and if she needs something, get it for her. I'm going to trust you since apparently she trusts you so much and I haven't seen her trust anyone. I hope to be back early tonight but I never know how these things will go. If there's a problem, call me at the station and if I'm not there you tell them to find me. Understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"Okay, now I need to get going. There is soup and some other stuff in the pantry. Make her whatever she thinks she can eat. Take care of her."

"I will, sir."

Then Hopper was gone. Mike closed the door and looked around. He didn't see El so he went looking for her. The doors along the hallway were all open except one. He figured that was her room. He gently turned the knob and knocked at the same time he opened the door.

She was lying in bed facing the door. She was asleep. Mike softly walked to the side of her bed. She was lying on her side, the covers pulled up but her arm lying over them. Mike took her hand in his.

"Hey, El." He whispered to her sleeping form. She looked so beautiful lying there. Hopper had gotten her face all clean and she looked like a sleeping angel to Mike. "I'm here with you."

She stirred. He felt her hand squeeze his even before he saw her open her eyes. "Mike?"

"Yeah, it's me. I'm here."

She opened her eyes. She still looked so tired. But when she saw him she smiled.

"I'm glad you're here." She pulled his arm and he didn't know what she needed. "Can you help me scoot over so there's room for you?"

"Sure, El. If that's what you want." He wound up lifting her and just moving her over so he could slide in. He kicked his shoes off before he got under her covers.

She wrapped her arm around him, he could feel how little energy she still had.

"It is what I want." She said softly. Mike hugged her to him. It had only been about fourteen hours since he'd seen her last but he had missed her and it made him feel so much better that she felt well enough to tell him what she wanted. She was just tired now. He had been so afraid that she wouldn't recover. He pulled her against him until she couldn't get any closer.

"I'm glad I'm here. I'll get you whatever you need." Mike said as he kissed the top of her head.

"Right now I just need you."

They stayed in her bed like that for the next two hours. Mike was happy to just lie there with her. He couldn't think of a single place he would rather be.

He carried her into the living room when she woke up. He placed her gently on the sofa, thinking to himself how nice it felt to carry her down the hall in his arms. He put a blanket over her and gave her the remote control while he went to make her some soup. He kept thinking the entire time he was in the kitchen making the soup that this is what he wanted to do forever. He wanted to take care of her forever, be it making her soup when she was sick, carrying her when she was too weak to walk, or making her laugh when she was feeling down. He took the soup on a tray back into the living room where she was.

"Do you think you can eat it? You really need to try." Mike was saying as he put the food on the coffee table and sat down next to El. "I can help you if you need me to." He lifted the bowl and held it closer to her. She took the spoon and managed a couple of bites but

he could see her hand shaking. "Here, let me help. Just sit back where you are comfortable." Mike held the bowl and fed her spoonfuls of soup until she had almost finished the entire bowl. She looked tired again when she was full. He went to move a pillow behind her head.

"No. I'd rather lean on you." She sounded confident. Not something Mike was used to hearing from her.

"Sure, El. Just get fixed however you need. I'm not going anywhere. Do you want to watch a movie? I can put it in before you get too comfy."

"Yes. Hop has some over on the shelf there." Mike followed her gaze and easily saw Hopper's movie shelf. He looked through the stack and found a few choices.

"Would you rather watch *Top Gun*, *Real Genius*, or *White Water Summer*? Oh, I haven't seen that one." Mike told her.

"Whichever one you want. I'll probably fall asleep anyway."

Mike chose *White Water Summer*. He popped the movie in and turned down the lights. He went to settle back on the sofa with El. She snuggled up against him immediately. He pulled a blanket over her. His hand found hers as the movie started.

"Hey, that guy looks a lot like the guy my friend Will's mom is dating. That's funny." Mike said as the movie started and he saw the main characters.

The movie turned out to be about an Outward Bound type group of kids who had to band together to save their leader when he was hurt in a hiking accident. It hit a little close to home. Mike was glad that El had fallen asleep about ten minutes after the movie started. She had moved down and had her head in his lap. He was running his fingers through her hair as she slept.

I love her.

The thought came from out of nowhere. Mike was caught a little off guard by his own mind.

I really do.

He smiled, looking down at her sleeping. He knew he would do anything for her.

Hopper returned that evening. Mike and El were sitting on the sofa wrapped in a blanket and each other. Mike was holding El's hand and didn't even flinch when Hopper came through the door. It was probably because she was holding his hand so tightly. He was just glad her grip seemed so much stronger than it had that morning.

"Hey, kids." Hopper said as he hung his hat on the rack. To Mike he said, "how's she doing?"

"She ate soup and later I got her to eat some toast. She is still tired but she seems stronger too."

Hopper joined them at the sofa. He sat on the coffee table where he was close to El.

"How are you feeling?"

"I feel better. Thank you for sending Mike. He makes me feel a lot better." Mike felt her squeeze his hand as she said this.

Hopper rolled his eyes. "Kid, as long as it seems beneficial I will bring him here every day."

"Good, he will always benefit me." El stated. Both men looked at each other, both surprised at the girl's forwardness. She must really be feeling better.

A few days later El felt well enough to return to school. She had Mike's phone number now and they had planned where they would meet on their first day back. She was still wary of jumping into his group of friends but he had assured her that it would be okay and while they may seem standoffish at first they were actually really cool and would come around. Hawkins High was teeming with whispers and gossip about what had happened on the backpacking trip. Everyone knew that Michael Wheeler and Jane Hopper had gone missing the first night and hadn't been found. They knew that when the bus returned Sunday evening it was met by cruisers from the

Hawkins Police Department and the officers looked somber. Rumors had been flying about where Mike and Jane could possibly be.

On Wednesday there had been an announcement that they had been found but that they would not be returning to school for a few days, allowing them both to recover. That bit of information caused all sorts of theories to circulate.

Mike got to school first. He was waiting on El in the hallway near the East entrance, near her locker, like they had planned.

"Hey, Wheeler, how's the weirdo? Kinky I bet." A voice called out as students drifted into the school.

Fucking Troy. Mike used his stature in his favor, pushing Troy against the lockers and looming over him. Mike was skinny but he was taller than Troy, his face full of intensity.

"You will *not* say things like that about her. Do you understand?" Mike whispered, his rage permeating the small space between them.

"Come on, Wheeler. I'm sure she's good for it. You were out there for days. Do you expect me to really think nothing happened? Or is she such a freak that it didn't even cross your mind?"

"She is not a freak, Troy. You *wish* you knew anyone as awesome as she is. You will not pick on her. You will not bully her or try to make her cry or anything of that nature."

"Oooh, Mikey's gonna be mad if Jane cries!" Troy mocked him.

"I warned you, Troy. Do not fuck with me about this." Mike pushed him against the locker. By that time Mike's other friends had arrived and were standing behind him, acting like backup should Mike need it. The bell rang and Mike seemed confused. He had been waiting on El but now classes were starting. He wondered if she was okay.

He had his first class with Lucas and Dustin. They had not had a chance to talk to him about being lost in the woods so they took advantage of their teacher choosing to give them busy work. First he fielded questions from everyone about what had happened. *We were looking at a waterfall and lost our direction. It was getting dark so we had*

to camp. Then it rained for days.

Then the obvious next question, *how did they find you?*

We found our own way out together.

Mike was vague on the nature of their rescue. He couldn't tell them how they *really* got back home.

He was trying to be polite about everything, no one was asking anything inappropriate and they had honest interest in what had happened to Mike and El, but Mike was still feeling edgy. He needed to see El. He was counting the minutes until lunchtime.

Dustin and Lucas also had questions.

"So, how was being lost in the woods?" Lucas asked..

"It was actually kind of great. We had food and we had shelter."

"How was it being with her for so long?" Dustin asked, honestly curious.

"Guys, El is awesome. I mean, maybe awesome isn't even a good enough word to describe her. She's a badass and she's smart and she can sing and she's, oh my god, she's so beautiful."

The boys exchanged glances. They had never heard Mike talk that way about a girl.

"Why did you call her El just now?" Dustin wondered.

"Um, it's just a nickname. She doesn't really like to go by Jane."

"Is she going to start sitting with us at lunch?" Lucas asked.

"Would that be a big deal to you, Lucas? I would like for her to. She doesn't have any friends besides me and that is ridiculous because she deserves for everyone to want to be her friend. She's so nice and she would do anything to help someone. If she wants to sit with me I totally want her to. If I have my way she will be around all the time."

"You must really like her, Mike." Dustin snickered, expecting Mike to deny it.

"*Like* might not even be the word for how I feel, Dustin."

By fourth period Mike was starting to feel edgy. He had really hoped to see El by now. He scanned the halls, still not seeing her silhouette. Then he had another run-in with Troy.

"Still haven't seen your *girlfriend*, Wheeler? I saw her. I saw her this morning and she looked as weird as ever. Why would you want to date a freak, Mike? She might as well have six arms!"

Mike tried to ignore him. He thought about how El would handle the situation. He was actually kind of glad Troy had said something though because it sounded like she definitely was at school today. But his *Mikeness* kicked in and he couldn't keep his mouth closed.

"She could walk through a river of *you* and come out clean on the other side, Troy. Say what you want. She'll always be better than you. You are *nothing*."

Troy punched Mike in the eye. Mike could feel it swelling closed almost immediately. The janitor actually pulled Troy off of Mike as the vice principal was coming down the hallway. Troy was sent to the principal's office and Mike was sent to the nurse.

Mike was still holding an ice pack over his eye when he sat down at his table at lunch. It had been a long morning. He sat facing the door of the cafeteria, his usual seat. Lucas sat across from him, Will sat beside him, and Dustin sat beside Lucas. They were all unpacking their lunch bags. The room was packed. Someone shouted across the hall at Mike, *heard Troy showed you!* Mike didn't respond. A group of girls walked past and he heard them laughing at him.

Lucas was saying something about his dad loaning him the car for the weekend but suddenly Mike couldn't hear him anymore. He couldn't hear the din of the lunchroom. He had looked up at the doors and *she* had walked through them.

He stood up. She stopped walking when she saw him. They stared at

each other for a moment, not noticing how everyone was now watching them, having seen *the weird girl* walk through the cafeteria doors.

Mike crossed to her and took her in his arms. She gasped, not expecting that he would want to admit in public that they were friends.

"I missed you." He said into her hair, his face buried in it.

"I missed you too, Mike. I wasn't sure..."

"Let me reassure you then." Mike held her face in his hands. He looked into her eyes and saw that she was looking at him with actual affection. He tucked a strand of hair behind her right ear, his thumb brushing her cheek gently. He didn't care that everyone was watching. He moved his head down and their lips were touching, softly at first, remembering, and then moving together more deeply, the passion evident. Whistles and shouts echoed through the lunchroom as Mike's hands moved into her hair and her hands went around his neck. She pulled back after a minute, her hand reaching for his black eye. Her fingers felt cool and gentle as she ran them over it, careful not to hurt him.

"What happened?" Her voice was soft but full of worry and concern.

"I'm fine. Troy is a mouthbreather. Now that you're here I can't even feel it anymore." Mike smiled down at her, still holding her close against him.

She pulled his head toward her, kissing his black eye. "I'm sorry."

"You don't have to be sorry for something *he* did. We talked about this. I only care about *you*. I was dead serious about that." He put his forehead on hers. He could smell vanilla and peaches. "I still am."

She smiled, causing her face to light up, and stood on her tiptoes to kiss him again. Some teacher might separate them at some point but until that happened they both were content to remain in each other's arms.

"Are you feeling better?" Mike asked between kisses. They couldn't

seem to move more than two inches away from each other,

"I was feeling better the minute I saw you." She said. She smiled at him and he knew that no matter what else happened in his life, she would always be the biggest part of it.

A/N: I'm too in love with this version of Mileven so even though this story is complete I am going to further their adventures under a new title. Thank you so much for reading and for all of the comments. I cannot promise that future stories about this particular Mileven will not be rated M, so look alive. ;)